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SUBJECT: WHA/CEN DIRECTOR WEBSTER'S MEETINGS IN BELIZE

¶1. (U) SUMMARY: WHA/CEN Office Director Christopher Webster met with Belize government officials, a Hand in Hand Ministries official, and American Chamber of Commerce board members on March 5 and 6 to discuss bilateral and regional issues including security and the Merida Initiative, the Guatemala/Belize border dispute, HIV/AIDs in the region, and the challenges facing American business people in Belize. Webster underscored the strong relationship between Belize and the U.S. during his meetings with the Minister of National Security, the CEO of Foreign Affairs and Trade, and the Police Commissioner. He concluded his visit with a trip to the Adjacency Zone to observe first-hand OAS efforts to manage the sometimes contentious Belize-Guatemala border dispute and the cross-border activities that have taken place in recent months. END SUMMARY.

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Regional Security and the Merida Initiative  
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¶2. (U) Webster underscored the strong relationship between Belize and the U.S. during his meetings with the Minister of National Security, the CEO of Foreign Affairs and Trade, and the Police Commissioner. Carlos Perdomo, the Minister of National Security, stated that the GOB is trying to implement the recommendations from an independent consultant who recently assessed the police department. The Crookes Report recommends considerable improvements to intelligence collection and additional training for police. The GOB plans to implement most of the recommendations over the next four years.

¶3. (U) Perdomo noted that his main challenges were related to resources - the GOB is dealing with a rise in criminal activity and has limited resources to combat the issue. Another security challenge noted by Perdomo is posed by Belize's porous borders - an ocean to the east, and a disputed, forested border with Guatemala to the west. CEO of National Security Brig. General (Ret.) Lloyd Gillett noted some increasing cooperation with the Government of Mexico in creating joint patrols to monitor the border on the Rio Hondo River, and that he believed this has deterred much illegal activity in the north of the country. He committed to continued cooperation with the U.S. and to ensuring that resources and assistance from the USG will be well used.

¶4. (U) Perdomo was concerned that, as traffickers throughout the region gain ground, violence in Belize will continue to escalate. He expressed his hope that the Merida Initiative will help strengthen the relationship between our countries and allow the GOB to purchase the appropriate equipment to combat drugs, corruption, and other criminal activity, as well as to strengthen the judicial system and intelligence services. He also noted that improved forensic abilities will be critical in the fight against drugs, crime, and guns.

¶5. (SBU) In a separate meeting with Police Commissioner Gerald Westby, the Commissioner pointed out that, while trafficking of cocaine via the sea has decreased significantly with the advent of the Belize National Coast Guard (established 2005), illegal aircraft landings appear to be increasing. In addition, the police are

receiving increased reports of the cultivation and export of 'hydromarijuana,' a more potent hybrid of cannabis. Assistant Commissioner Allen Whyllie noted that police are severely under-resourced and that the Belize Police Department is largely an unarmed force. However, proposed legislation will allow the police increased authorization for surveillance, to include wire-tapping for intelligence information which the police believe will help improve their intelligence operations.

¶6. (SBU) When Webster asked the Commissioner about GOB policy toward Cuban refugees, he replied (unofficially) that when the Coast Guard encounters Cuban refugees at sea, they quietly refuel the incoming vessel and try to assist them with any mechanical problems, before sending the refugee vessel on its way. However, when refugees are found on land they must be arrested and detained because other agencies become involved. The Cuban refugees are then repatriated. (Note: The Embassy is aware of several cases in which refugees were unable to obtain their Cuban documentation. In these cases, the Immigration Department provided temporary documentation for them and then lost track of the individuals. End Note.)

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Belize-Guatemala Border Dispute  
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¶7. (SBU) The Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of the MFA, Ambassador Alexis Rosado, thanked the USG for its support and assistance and encouraged the USG to continue supporting OAS efforts to resolve the border dispute with Guatemala. He highlighted the GOB's 'neutral' educational campaign to inform its citizens about the upcoming referendum that will be held simultaneously in both countries. He also noted that taking this issue to the International Court of

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Justice is the only practical way to resolve the dispute, since negotiations have failed, but he is doubtful that the referendum will pass in Belize. Perdomo, the Minister of National Security, echoed this concern, stating that many Belizeans feel that only Belize has something to lose in this dispute. Webster told Rosado and Perdomo that the U.S. supports a process for both nations to resolve the Belize-Guatemala border dispute issue.

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Adjacency Zone  
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¶8. (U) Webster also toured the Adjacency Zone and heard a presentation from the Organization of American States (OAS) Program Director, Miguel Trinidad, highlighting OAS challenges and accomplishments in the disputed area. Trinidad noted the recent cooperation between the BDF and Guatemalan forces during the removal of an illegal storage container/retail shop from Jalacte, and during the relocation of illegal Guatemalan communities on the Belizean side of the border. The OAS representative expressed gratitude for U.S. support for the effort and noted that the question of resources for the next phase is already under discussion. Webster encouraged the Program Director to provide additional reporting about the Adjacency Zone's activities to keep the United States and other potential donors informed and to justify requests for additional funds.

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Business Climate  
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¶8. (U) Webster met with American Chamber of Commerce (AmCham) board members to learn more about the business climate in Belize. Taxation and corruption remain the board members' top concerns. AmCham also pointed out that Belize maintains a business licensing system, which is often subject to political intervention and which decreases competition. They informed Webster of their efforts to collaborate with other chambers of commerce in Belize to present a united position to the GOB on these pivotal issues.

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HIV/AIDS

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¶9. (U) The Hand in Hand Ministries Director Abel Vargas provided Webster with insight into the HIV/AIDS outlook for Belize. Hand in Hand Ministries in Belize is affiliated with Hand in Hand Ministries in Kentucky. Belize has the highest HIV prevalence rate in the region and social stigma deters individuals from being tested. The social stigma also discourages people from interacting with infected individuals; this includes preventing infected persons from receiving treatment from most of the medical community. Hand in Hand primarily works with infants and children infected with HIV, providing them with free schooling, counseling, daycare, medical care, and anti-retrovirals.

¶10. Webster has cleared this cable.

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